



## Pick Your Path to Health

### **Protect Yourself and Your Kids**

Every thirty seconds a woman is bullied, kicked, punched, slapped, or threatened by someone who she believes loves her. That's over one million cases of violence between intimate partners annually, and women are not the only ones who suffer. In a national survey of more than 2,000 American families, 50 percent of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children.

Violence at home is a major crisis in our society, and African American women are equally vulnerable. Eighteen percent of African American women have suffered abuse in the last year, and according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, nearly half have lived through physical or emotional abuse. Unfortunately, these are the lucky ones. Many African American women don't live to tell about abuse.

### **Seek help**

If you or your children are being abused, report the abuse to the authorities. "A lot of women are beaten an average of four or five times before they make their first police report," says Sacramento Police Sgt. David Ransom of the family abuse/bias crime unit. "They're embarrassed to report it. They think it was their fault, and don't want the guy to go to jail. A lot of them are afraid to make a report, and they think things are going to get better."

If you're undecided about reporting domestic abuse, consider that things will only get better if your partner gets the help needed to address the violence

### **Make a Plan**

If you intend to leave, keep all your important documents organized and in one place so you can get to them easily. You will need these documents to apply for benefits, take legal action, or to begin to reestablish your life. These documents include birth certificates for you and your children, your marriage license, leases, or deeds in your name or both yours and your partner's names, your checkbook, your charge cards, bank statements and charge account statements, insurance policies, proof of income for you and your spouse (pay stubs or W-2s), and any documentation of past incidents of abuse (photos, police reports, medical records).

## **Be Prepared**

If you are still in the relationship:

- Think of a safe place to go if an argument occurs, but avoid rooms with no exits such as bathrooms or rooms with weapons such as the kitchen.
- Think about and make a list of safe people to contact in an emergency.
- Keep change with you at all times to make telephone calls.
- Memorize important phone numbers or sew them into the padding of your bras.
- Establish a code word or sign so that family, friends, teachers, or co-workers know when to call for help.
- Think about what you will say if your partner becomes violent.
- Remember you have the right to live without fear and violence.

## **Protect Yourself and Your Children**

If you have left the relationship:

- Change your phone number.
- Screen calls.
- Save and document all contacts, messages, injuries, or other incidents involving the batterer.
- Change locks, if the batterer has a key.
- Avoid staying alone.
- Plan how to get away if confronted by an abusive partner.
- If you have to meet your partner, do it in a public place and let someone you can trust know your plans.
- Vary your routine.
- Notify school and work contacts.
- Call a shelter for battered women.
- Consider changing your name.
- Consider changing jobs.
- Consider getting a new social security number.
- Finally, women with children no longer have to fear for their lives or the lives of their children when a former partner exercises his visitation rights. Two federal laws passed recently require courts drafting orders for visitation rights to consider the safety risks to victims of domestic violence and their children. One measure requires children be exchanged through a trained third party who must supervise the visit. Another resolution calls on courts that

require mediation in divorce to allow domestic violence victims to opt out of such dangerous requirements.

The following organizations offer information on your rights and on assistance programs near you:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or visit the Web site at [www.ndvh.org](http://www.ndvh.org)
- Battered Women's Justice Project (Civil Office) at 1-800-903-0111 or visit the Web site at [www.bwjp.org](http://www.bwjp.org) This organization provides referrals for legal representation.
- Family Violence Prevention Fund's Web site at [www.endabuse.org](http://www.endabuse.org)
- Check the National Women's Health Information Center Web site at [www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov) or call 1-800-994-WOMAN or for TDD 1-888-220-5446 for advice on where you can call for health information in your State.

Find help for yourself, your friends, your sisters, or anyone you know who is living under the fear of domestic violence. You deserve to feel safe in your own home. Seeking help will keep you safe and lead you down a path to better health.

*Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at [www.4woman.gov](http://www.4woman.gov). This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.*